

“I have walked and prayed for this young child”

*Mae*

Mae was shucking quahogs on the wooden table behind the Boat House Café when she saw the tall, athletic woman shepherding three children along the path that led from East Beach. The children, two boys and a girl, looked to be around Jo and Izzy’s ages; and like her own children, they were bursting with pent-up energy after being cooped up inside after three days of unrelenting rain.

The sun had finally broken through this morning, heralding what Mae anticipated would be a busy day at the café as other mothers, driven to distraction trying to contain and entertain their children, would join her.

Most of Mae’s customers arrived at the café by boat, but a cottage had been built just west of the lighthouse. Mae guessed that the family making its way along the meadow were the people Frank Bennett had told her were renting the new place.

“Yoo-hoo! Is this the Boat House Café?” The woman strode up to Mae, one hand clasping the hand of the little girl, the youngest of the three children, while the boys ran ahead to the dock.

“Boys, stay away from the edge!”

Mae put down her knife, wiped her hands and stuck one out in greeting.

“This is indeed the café. Welcome! I’m Mae Monroe, the proprietor.”

“I’m Lydia Hammond. This is my daughter, Susan, and the hellions are Richard and Louis. Do you know if there are any other children out here?”

Mae smiled. “There are—my own. I have a twelve-year-old son, Josiah—we call him Jo—and a seven-year-old daughter, Isabella, who answers to Izzy. From what I can guess, around your children’s ages.”

“Oh, thank God! Frank mentioned there were children nearby, but with all the rain, we haven’t seen another soul—child or adult—since we arrived.”

“Well, come on into the café and we can acquaint the children with one another when mine get back from clamming. Where are you folks from?”

Mae picked up the bowl of shucked clams and led Lydia through the back door and into the kitchen.

Betty, Mae’s best friend and the heart of the Boat House Café, was at the counter, peeling potatoes.

“Mae, have you got some clams ready for the chowder?”

“Here you are. Betty, this is Lydia. She’s renting that new cottage beyond the lighthouse.”

“Welcome, Lydia! How long will you be staying?”

“We’ve rented the cottage for the whole summer. My husband is a cardiologist in Philadelphia and will probably come up on weekends. But I’ll be here with the kids till the end of August. Speaking of which, I better go round up the boys and get them settled at a table before they wind up in the water.”

She moved purposefully through the swinging door into the dining room.

“She seems down-to-earth for a city doctor’s wife,” said Betty, watching her go.

“It will be different, having another family within walking distance of Innisfree,” Mae mused. When she had first returned to Chappaquiddick in 1941, Mae had purchased an abandoned fishing camp on a remote patch of meadow and woods on Cape Poge, not far from the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. She had named her land “Innisfree” after the Yeats poem beloved by her Irish mother and as a memento of the cottage across the bay where Mae had grown up, which her mother had also called Innisfree.

“Different good or bad?” Betty never missed an opportunity to zero in on Mae’s concerns.

Mae shrugged. "I'm not sure. I know the kids are lonely sometimes, especially Jo. Having a seven-year-old sister as your only playmate can get boring really fast. I was surrounded by siblings and neighborhood kids growing up and loved it. I can't expect Jo and Izzy to appreciate the solitude the way Tobias and I do now. I guess I knew this part of the island would change eventually, with more people wanting to stay for longer than a day trip to the beach. I just don't know if I'm ready for it."

"Well, one family is not exactly an onslaught. And she seems decent."

Mae peered through the glass in the door as Lydia corralled her boys at a table near the front of the dining room overlooking the dock. Lydia struck Mae as a woman who had everything effortlessly under control. Despite the rain, she already had a glowing tan and her long-limbed, graceful body looked less like that of a mother of three and more like an Olympic athlete. The figure skater Sonja Henie popped into Mae's head, an odd image in the midst of this steamy late June morning. But there was definitely something Nordic about Lydia.

Mae shook off the creeping insecurities Lydia's arrival had unleashed. Betty was right. It would be great for Jo and Izzy to have playmates this summer.

At that moment, Jo pushed open the screen door into the kitchen.

"I brought up the last of the quahogs and left them on the table outside."

"There you are, Jo." Mae looked past him. "Where's Izzy?"

"She's lost in one of her other worlds at the tidal pool. I think she's watching a crab. I brought her bucket up."

"We've already got customers. Please wash up and then take the orders of the family who just arrived. After that, I need you to shuck the clams. Betty and I are going to be too busy between the dining room and the kitchen."

He nodded. She knew he'd be pleased to be trusted with the shucking, less so with working the front of the house. A little too much like her when it came to strangers.

She turned to Betty.

"I'm going to fetch Izzy. If I don't, she'll be there all afternoon." Mae covered the ground between the café and the steps down to the sand flats on Shear Pen Pond quickly. The lunch crowd was arriving. She could see a couple of boats approaching the dock, and she knew Betty would have her hands full in the kitchen.

She called out to Izzy as she approached the steps, but didn't hear a reply. She was less worried than exasperated. She knew Izzy was a dawdler and a daydreamer. She checked her impatience as she headed down the steps. Just as Jo had described, Izzy was crouched on the sand intently studying a tiny crab inching its way toward the water.

"Izzy, lunch time. Let's get these rakes put away and you washed up."

Izzy looked up at Mae, slightly dazed as she was pulled out of her reverie.

Mae was used to seeing her daughter's attention somewhere other than the present moment, but the expression on Izzy's face was disturbing. She saw pain, confusion, disorientation. Her little girl was lost somewhere inside herself.

Mae reached out and stroked Izzy's face. Her skin was hot, more than expected after a morning in the sun.

"Honey, do you feel OK?"

"I feel funny, Mama. All wobbly. That's why I sat down. I think I'm going to throw up." And she did, onto the poor crab.

Mae wiped Izzy's face with the edge of her apron and scooped her up in her arms. She was a lightweight, their hummingbird, Tobias had called her. She flitted from one absorption to another, drinking in the world around her.

Izzy moaned softly in Mae's arms, where Mae was even more aware of the heat emanating from her daughter's body. She

climbed swiftly up the stairs and into the cottage, where she settled Izzy on her bed.

“I’ll be right back, Hummingbird. I’m just going to run over to the Boat House to let Betty know I’ll be staying with you.”

Mae ran to the café unencumbered by the weight of her daughter. She burst into the kitchen from the back door, out of breath.

Betty wheeled around.

“What’s happened? Something with Izzy?” Betty rushed to Mae’s side.

“She’s sick. Feels like a fever and she just upchucked her breakfast. I’m sorry. You’re going to have to handle lunch alone while I figure out what’s going on. Give my apologies to the new neighbor.”

“I’ll manage. Jo’s taking orders. I think he’s trying to make up for the fact that he left his sister. I’ll check in on you as soon as it quiets down after lunch.”

Mae was sponging Izzy with lukewarm water to cool her down when she heard a knock at the door and the voice of Lydia Hammond. She tucked a sheet around Izzy and went to the door.

“I heard from Betty that your little girl is sick. I’m not trying to intrude, but I thought I’d offer my help. I’m a nurse.”

“Thanks. I wouldn’t want to expose your kids if she has something contagious . . . Mae looked beyond Lydia, but her children were nowhere in sight.

“I’ve left them at the café. Betty apparently has things under control with some homemade donuts. Is there somewhere I can wash my hands?”

Mae led her through the house to the kitchen and then to Izzy’s room.

Lydia was gentle with Izzy, asking her a few questions before turning to Mae.

“Why don’t we let Izzy rest a few minutes? You and I can talk about what will help her feel better.”

Lydia took Mae by the elbow and guided her out to the front porch.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this. It has all the marks of the early stage of polio. I saw several cases during the ’52 epidemic. My recommendation would be to get her to the hospital today. I don’t suppose Chappy has an ambulance that could make it out here.”

Mae froze as she listened to the words coming out of Lydia’s mouth. A part of her resisted what this woman who had swooped so emphatically into their lives was saying. Why should she trust her or even believe she was a nurse? But if Lydia was right, Izzy was gravely ill. Mae had no choice but to follow her advice. She shook herself out of her numbness.

“There’s a firetruck, but it’d be faster to take her by boat.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Please go back to the café and tell Betty to close up for the rest of the day, and ask Jo to get the boat ready. You probably want to get your children away from here.”

“They were vaccinated this spring. What about yours?”

“The island had a clinic in May. Both kids got shots. I thought the vaccine was supposed to protect them?”

“It should. But no vaccine is 100% effective. At the very least, it may reduce the severity of the infection for your daughter. I’ll get things going while you get her ready to transport. We have a ham radio at our cottage. I can call ahead to the hospital to let them know you’re coming. I’ll see if I can get an ambulance to meet you at the dock.”

Mae nodded. “I’m grateful to you.”

Lydia left for the café while Mae wrapped Izzy in a cotton blanket. She was still burning up as she carried her to the dock.

Jo was waiting at the wheel of the boat and Betty stood ready to cast off as soon as Mae and Izzy were settled in the stern.

“Do you want me to come with? The café is locked up.”

Mae squeezed her hand. “You always know what I need before I do. Yes, come.”

Jo pulled away from the dock as Betty clambered aboard. Within minutes they were slipping through the Gut, the narrow mouth of the bay, and speeding across the water to Oak Bluffs.

“We need to get word to Tobias,” Mae mouthed to Betty over the drone of the engine.

“I’ll take care of it when we get to shore. Let’s hope Lydia got through and an ambulance is waiting for you.”

As Jo skimmed into the harbor they could see the flashing lights. He maneuvered the boat into a slip and arms were reaching out for Izzy before he had killed the engine.

Mae climbed up to follow.

“I’ll stay behind with Jo to get the boat secured. We’ll meet you at the hospital.” Betty gave Mae a hug.

The ride to the hospital was a blur of activity and questions as the rescue squad took Izzy’s vital signs, inserted an IV and asked Mae about Izzy’s symptoms. As she answered, she sought reassurance that the situation was not as dire as she feared from Lydia’s diagnosis.

“My neighbor, a nurse, thought it might be polio,” she whispered, turning away briefly from Izzy’s frightened face.

The two technicians looked at one another across Izzy.

“We had another case a couple of days ago. A child from the elementary school, a second grader.”

“Izzy is in second grade.” Mae rubbed her forehead. She didn’t want this other piece of information, this accumulating evidence that Lydia might, after all, be right.

“Mama, it hurts,” Izzy whimpered.

“I know, Hummingbird. I’m sorry. We’ll be there soon and the doctor will help make you better.”

Mae wanted to believe that Izzy would be made better, but everything she knew about polio offered little hope.

Izzy was Tobias and Mae’s miracle child. After the chemotherapy Mae had endured when she’d been diagnosed with cancer right after the war ended, her doctors informed her she’d most likely not have any more children. She and Tobias had

accepted the news. She was alive. They had won custody of Josiah in a legal battle with Mae's sister, who had tried to remove Jo from Mae's care. They were grateful for all they did have and did not dwell on what might have been.

And then Mae had become pregnant. Her doctors cautioned her to expect a difficult pregnancy that might end in miscarriage or stillbirth. Every day she held onto the baby was a gift. The fear of delivering another dead baby, like her first child so many years before, was never far from her thoughts.

Izzy had been born a month early, a tiny, squalling bundle who spent her first weeks in an incubator. But she lived and went on to flourish. Watching her daughter now in the ambulance, tethered to an IV and in pain, Mae had visions both of Izzy's past in the incubator and possible future in an iron lung. She tried futilely to push that image out of her mind.

You cannot dwell on what might be, she screamed to herself, or it will steal the energy you need to deal with what is here and now.

The ambulance came to a halt at the emergency entrance of the hospital and the doors were pulled open by staff waiting for them. Mae scrambled out as they lifted Izzy's stretcher and placed her on a gurney. She did not let go of Izzy's hand as she was rushed through corridors Mae knew only too well.

Their destination was an empty room at the end of a hall that was closed off from the rest of the hospital.

"We're putting your daughter in isolation, Mrs. Monroe, as a precaution. If she does have polio, we don't want her near other children."

"The ambulance workers told me there was another child on the island diagnosed with polio. Where is he?"

"He's been sent to Boston. He needed an iron lung and we weren't equipped to treat him here."

"Will my daughter also be sent away?" Mae gripped Izzy's hand tighter.



“Doctor will decide. First we need to get her settled and confirm what we’re dealing with. I’m going to ask you to leave now, Mrs. Monroe. We shouldn’t have let you come this far in the first place.”

“I don’t want to leave her. She’s only a baby. You can see how frightened she is and how much she’s hurting.”

“That’s out of the question, Mrs. Monroe. The protocol for polio is strict quarantine, even from parents. You can wait in the family lounge on the pediatric ward. Someone will come to you when we have more information. I have to insist.”

The nurse was rigid and implacable.

Mae gathered Izzy in her arms.

“I won’t be far away, little bird. Be as brave as I know you are.”

Izzy bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears. She clung to Mae.

“Please don’t leave me. I’m scared.”

“Have courage, Izzy. Even when we are afraid we can be brave.”

Mae reluctantly extracted herself from Izzy’s fragile hold before the nurse pulled her away.

With leaden feet she located the pediatric lounge and then burst into tears.